



CHANGING SCENARIO: CHALLENGES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The institution's performance takes into account several criteria as curriculum, qualified staff, research, extension and innovative practices etc. Through an analysis of its strong and weak areas, opportunities and threats the institution is rated on its performance. The very nature of this report, made available to the institution should support the stakeholders to appreciate their strengths, work upon their weaknesses to remove them and strive to seize the opportunities available to them. This requires developing suitable follow up strategies.

KEYWORDS: Privatization, Globalization, Quality, Education, Quality Culture.

Introduction:

Indian tradition is steeped in the highest philosophical foundation laid by her ancient sages and seers in the course of their pursuit of the highest knowledge and excellence. Ancient records of this lofty Indian tradition testify that India had a highly developed system of higher education at par with the modern university system. Historically the earliest university in India dates back to 6th century BC and was set up in Takshashila, now in Pakistan. Later in fourth and fifth century AD the highly acclaimed universities of Nalanda and Vikramshila came into existence. The modern higher education system is however merely 147 years old with the first three universities being setup in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras in 1857 under the British rule.

Post-Independence Scene:

After independence, there has been a phenomenal growth in higher education in terms of quantity. From 30 universities, 591 colleges, 21,244 teachers and 2,28,000 students enrolled in 1947-48, today we have 294 Universities/ Institutes, 13150 Affiliated Colleges, 427 lakh teachers and a student strength of 88.21 lakh. This unprecedented increase in numbers in a short span of fifty years, coupled with unmatched increase in infrastructure has led to dilution in standards, quality and excellence.

Universities being centers of higher education are established to assist in economic, social and cultural development of a country. They are required to undertake research relevant to local needs, make their knowledge and resources available to community through advice and consultancy services. Being publically funded these Universities, these centers of higher education are accountable to society, to the students to their employers, in short to all the stakeholders of this education system. They must respond to the overall national educational plans of the country by developing personnel capable of imparting quality education. Accountability then, is a willingly accepted, moral obligation to continually strive to improve the quality of the educational programs. It cannot effectively be enforced by the State, (Wiggins, 1993) but must be based on a system that confronts teachers more directly with their successes and failures. In other words, quality assurance can come through teachers willingly accept in their responsibility to their students, to their institution, to society and to their profession. It is responsibility to provide an education capable of producing men of quality and competence to match the needs and requirements of the employment sectors.

Internationalization of Higher Education:

Universities even as they respond to local needs are truly international in outlook and an integral part of the global structure. Madhusudan and Manjunath (2003) have said, "The Indian Higher Education system, in essence, is universal in outlook and international in approach. International co-operation has been a focus area in promoting the ideals and objectives of higher education, namely, research to generate new knowledge, publication to disseminate this knowledge, curriculum development and transaction aimed at much needed human resource development and lastly, generation of material and financial resources needed for social development. Indian higher education system has already established linkages with international agencies such as UNESCO, Common Wealth of Learning, SAARC and other UN organizations by coordinating programs at national and international levels through an apex advisory body, the Indian National Commission (INC) set up in as far back as 1949.

The country paper entitled "Higher Education in India: Vision and Action" presented in 1998 at the World Conference on Higher Education in the Twenty-first

Century, dealt in detail with the cooperation and collaboration between Indian higher education and international bodies like UNESCO. India assists in organization its regional activities like Workshops, Symposia, Conferences and also participates in all areas of competence. Nine UNESCO chairs have been set up in India in areas as diverse as eco-technology, cultural development, Science education, peace, human rights and teacher education. More such Chairs in the areas of Science and Social Science education are in the offing. Bilateral exchange programs between Indian and Foreign Universities in over 70 countries are implemented by the University Grants Commission.

The World Conference on Higher Education (UNESCO-1998) had stated that higher education was a public good and public support for higher education and research was essential to ensure balanced achievements of educational and social missions. It further stated that each higher education institution should define its mission in keeping with the present and future needs of society and provide access to quality education on the basis of human rights and democracy. An education capable of providing a sustainable and environmentally sound economic and Social development. Therefore, no government can light shy of contributing its mite to an education capable of providing good governance through its products.

Privatization and Globalization:

The internationalization in the educational services Sector so far witnessed in India is very different, both concept and approach, to that envisaged under the Liberalization-Privatization-Globalization (LPG) policies of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). India with just six percent enrollment ratio in higher education an outlay of as little as just 3.8% of GNP has been a major exporter of trained manpower to the developed nations. In 1995 the income from trade in higher education through consumption abroad was 27 billion US dollars and the major beneficiaries were the developed countries like USA and Germany, France and England were the other gainers. Although India on account of its quality products of the higher education Sector made its presence felt globally, but lost out both on the economic and social development fronts. This export or consumption abroad in the area of higher education resulted in a two-fold fallout, which had both positive and negative effect on our economy and education. On the one hand, it generated resources, created employment, expanded facilities and raised standards in the higher education sector, on the other hand, it resulted in brain drain aggravating the existing shortage of qualified human capital, thus driving down the quality of educational services. In the long run this has precipitated the crisis of quality in higher education.

Globalization on the other hand is distinct and different from internationalization. Globalization may be defined as the interdependence and interconnectedness of the modern World through an increase in the flow of goods, services, information and capital both human and physical. It has resulted in the perception of higher education as a commercial product, with dealings in it being governed by market forces and principles of demand and supply.

Globalization may be described as a process through which national economies are integrated by the free movement of goods, capital, labor and ideas. But this integration as it occurs tends to deliver high benefits to the predominantly rich and developed world. It increases the ability of rich nations to compete for the best brains, the talented students and faculty, to retain them and focus on the problems of the North (UNESCO-1998) and not on the South. This phenomenon of drain-train-retain of the best brains undermines the South's ability to compete

economically in an increasing competitive world, made so by globalization. Not merely being left out of the race of competitiveness the poorer nations are also deprived of the chance of building a better government and higher educational institutions essential to achieving even a semblance of parity with the richer nations.

Challenges: The 'What', 'Why' and 'How' of Quality Assurance in Education.

Quality and Education:

The 21st century knowledge driven society has quality as its defining element, in the same way as 'tradition' defined the ancient society, 'religion' defined the society in the middle ages and 'reason' was the defining element of the 19th century modern society. What is this 'Quality'? It may be defined in terms of excellence, perfection, standards and value for money, competencies for work, consistency and relevance. These according to Prasad (2003) are the elements, which define the nature and purpose of the social activity of education. The quality of this Knowledge Society depends upon the quality of education it fosters. It is this quality, which makes education socially and individually relevant, but if the quality of education is not assured then the education, which is advocated as solution to social problems, may itself become a problem. It is generally seen that increase in numbers results in decrease in quality. The same holds true of education too, where mass education has resulted in mass unemployment and has led to mass unrest. This may hold true of our conventional system of education, but recent developments, especially in distance education system, have disproved this contention. The open learning distance education systems have endorsed the fact that good quality education can be provided to large numbers in widely distributed areas at comparatively lower costs, provided appropriate measures are taken to ensure maintenance of Standards.

Need for Quality Assurance:

Having defined quality in and as a function of higher education it remains to understand the "Why" of quality assurance in education.

In a developing country like ours, the diametrically opposite demands of quality education and the increasing numbers of students demanding higher education are in conflict. This growing demand for tertiary education has brought to the fore the problems of access, equity and quality. As the developing countries address themselves to the problems of access and equity the problem of quality gets acute. An independent task force set up by UNESCO in 1998 has in its report entitled "Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise," said that today higher education has become basic education demanded by the masses and can no longer be confined to a tiny elite. This is more so in the developing world due to three factors at work here. Firstly, the incredible growing thirst for knowledge, secondly the growing importance of knowledge in society. Thirdly, the inexorable and often cruel logic of globalization.

How Quality can be assured?

The growing concern for quality culture in higher education the world over has spawned a problem of gigantic proportions for India, which needs to develop both quality and quantity of higher education with better academic and physical infrastructure. Despite the resource crunch, this need for quality assurance, evaluation and sustenance has led the University Grants Commission (UGC), working towards quality enhancement since its inception, to set up the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in 1994 to assess and accredit institutions of higher learning in accordance with national and international norms mooted by International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). The UGC has made NAAC accreditation mandatory for institutions of higher education linking it with financial assistance and academic recognition. In the field of teacher education National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) has also entered, into memorandum of understanding (MOU) with (NAAC) in 2002 for accreditation of teacher education institutions.

Ensuring Quality of Teaching, Research and Extension:

The three dimensions of higher education name teaching, research and extension should be strengthened. While teaching and research are expected to complement and supplement each other it is the third dimension, namely extension which is the real parameter of quality. It is expected of the universities to so groom their intake into reservoirs of human resource of which any nation would be proud. The quality of the products of our higher education institutions can be gauged from the fact that of 32 million of Indians constituting a mere 15% of the US population have given America 28% of IBM technologists, 34% of Microsoft employees, 36% of NASA scientists, 38% of doctors and much more. But this is not the time to rest on our laurels. A multidisciplinary approach to broaden our horizon, equip ourselves with knowledge and skills to deal effectively with emerging situations is required. Such cross-fertilization of ideas in an open and congenial atmosphere is bound to lead to quality in higher education.

All India Higher Education Service:

National development depends upon the quality of human resource developed at its universities. In this context universities are expected to grind, polish and tune their intake to match national standards. The high quality of human resource thus produced by the universities will enable them to scale new heights of excellence in the field of education. This will require dedicated staff, committed to quality

assurance. This in turn will require the creation of a cadre of "All India Higher Education Service", to man the various cadres of teaching and administrative staff of higher education institution. Being a centralized service will ensure quality of a comparable nature in educational institutions. The conduct of a National Eligibility Test (NET) is a step in this direction. The need of the hour is to recognize and uphold its results rather than dilute it by converting State Level Eligibility Test (SLET) or allowing for concession in the form of equating it with Ph.D. for appointment in the University or Colleges. The All India nature of this service will facilitate movement across state boundaries and will curb inbreeding and nepotism and lead to cross fertilization of ideas in an open and congenial atmosphere, leading to quality in higher education.

The teachers in higher education institutions must come from the best brains in the society. Only teachers with high intellectual capacities, self-confidence and good communication skills alone can ensure quality. Again such teachers should be exposed to emerging frontiers of knowledge so that they can update their teaching abilities and skills. UGC organizes Refresher courses, Seminars, Workshops and Conferences to this end, but the end will be achieved only if such forums permit interaction at the national or international level. It is generally seen that such courses and seminars become local and regional affairs due to organizational, financial and linguistic problems. Therefore, for quality assurance at the level of higher education an all India cadre of teachers may be the solution.

Quality Sustenance:

The need for assuring quality must not end with accreditation. The self-study and quality assurance should not be a one-time project to be revived only at the time of the next accreditation.

NAAC report on the institution's performance takes into account several criteria as curriculum, qualified staff, research, extension and innovative practices etc. Through an analysis of its strong and weak areas, opportunities and threats (SWOT) the institution is rated on its performance. The very nature of this report, made available to the institution should support the stakeholders to appreciate their strengths, work upon their weaknesses to remove them and strive to seize the opportunities available to them. This requires developing suitable follow up strategies.

Developing a Quality Culture:

There is a need to develop a quality culture in our institutions. This will require mental infrastructure more than physical infrastructure, because quality depends upon our sincerity of purpose, our vision and conviction to do our duties. The development of such a culture will depend upon the academic leadership of an institution. The leadership must create an environment, which encourages performance. A transformative leadership capable of translating intentions into actions and actions into quality a leader who can say that his work is his quality. To conclude I would like to quote Mahatma Gandhi, "We must be the change we wish to see in the world".

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